Hey, Man!

It's The Turtles!

Hi, I'm here with Mark Volman of Flo and Eddie," says Mark Volman into my tape recorder, "formally The Turtles, now The Turtles, always will be The Turtles."

I'd just spent an hour and a half waiting for Flo and Eddie to arrive at WXRK radio's Madison Avenue studios. Howard Stern, going biker in leather jacket and jeans, had come through the lobby shortly after he got off the air and departed into an elevator; a gray-haired, soft-spoken folk musician arrived to record a segment with Pete Fornatele; and as the clock ticked towards the duo's air time (Monday through Friday, two to six pm), it became increasingly apparent they'd forgotten I was coming.

Volman, both taller and thinner than listeners are lead to believe, arrives first, apologetic and brandishing a newly acquired baseball autographed by the late Yankee manager Billy Martin. We settle down in a conference room just past a receptionist, and Volman, aware he's to be on the air soon, begins to retrace The Turtles history as radio performers in torrents.

The first time they tried to do radio was in Los Angeles in 1973. Shadoe Stevens, lately of America's Top Forty, produced. The show, later to be syndicated nationally, was called Flo and Eddie by the Fireside. "We found out you could be a movie star or a TV star and still make records," recalls Volman, "but to be a radio star and do so was just impossible. People wouldn't play your records for fear they'd be promoting your radio show which was on another station."

Interested in promoting their recording career, Flo and Eddie bowed out of radio for over a decade, but in 1989, some eight years after making their last record, the opportunity to get back into radio presented itself in the guise of a guest spot doing afternoon-drive on WXRK. They'd fill in for DJ Tony Pig, program director Mark Chernoff told them, while Pig filled in for a vacationing Meg Griffin. Then the ratings took off.

"Howard and I were beginning to tire of the touring schedule we'd been on," says Volman. "We'd just done two successful tours which kept us traveling around the United States in buses for nearly a year and, you know, touring is romantic when you're twenty, but when you're forty two years old ... [well], radio seemed like a natural place for us to move into for awhile."

Whether creating hit music in the Sixties or working in-between the songs on the radio in the Ninties, Volman and Howard Kaylan, dubbed the Florescent Leech and Eddie by Frank Zappa, have always managed to walk the fine line between the manic and the mellow. Besides their almost groovy 'Wow, what a great record man,' patter, there are contests where the prize is, more often than not, a small, plastic Turtle pin; and interviews with record making friends like Paul Revere, of Paul Revere and The Raiders, Lulu, The J. Geils Band's Peter Wolf and Aerosmith's Steven Tyler. What music is played on the show, however, is mostly decided by others at the station.

"We'll get things on like "Lies" by The Knickerbockers and maybe a little more T. Rex than you'll hear at other times on the station, but I'm a little obscure," Volman admits, "The music I like is not always classic rock, it's classic obscure rock — things like The Merry-Go-Round's "You're A Very Lovely Woman" or Jo Jo Gunn's "Run, Run, Run," so I think I feel a little more comfortable having somebody whose career has been programming involved in what we're playing."

Still waiting for Kaylan to arrive, the subject of our conversation turns to The Turtles as a musical entity.

"We still do shows like the ones at The Bottom Line during the holidays, but by and large I think we're out of the music business in that way for right now. There was a time when we were very pulled away from our hit music," Volman admits. "As we moved into the Seventies, we aspired to be thought of as more of a creative band, to be accepted by our peers, and we began to think that the music we made in the Sixties might be considered a bit teeny-bopper, a little too glossy, a lilttle bit wimpy even, and as we grew up, we saw how our music fit into the scheme of things. We were certainly onto something."

That something encompassed both words and music, but it's The Turtles's vocal arrangements that people most often refer to when talking about the band. It's the bouncy Ba-Ba-Ba's during the middle eight bars of their biggest hit "Happy Together" that's become as familiar to theirs and subsequent generations as the high kicks of the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes.

"We used to call that sound the 'Incredi-Voices,'" says Volman. "And it really came about because of Paul Douglas, who produced The Turtles and later went on to produce The Monkees. It's a technique that is a bit time consuming and entails a lot of layering: using two voices to sing one part, doing that four times; doing that with the second part; the third part; on up to twenty-four stacked voices singing three parts, in so doing creating an androgenous male voice."

But, he quickly points out, "The reason records like "She Would Rather Be With Me" or "Happy Together" were successful were the lyrics. Like in "Happy Together" the line is "Imagine me and you ..." People sometimes overlook the fact that, yes it is a love song, but told from the perspective of somebody that's not with a girl. It creates a wonderful visual in rock and roll. In "She Would Rather Be With Me" the idea is some girls like to run around, but my girl wouldn't; in fact your girl doesn't love you as much as she would rather be with me. What a nice twist, in a love song! Your girl likes me more than she likes you. There's something really fun about that."

Kaylan, it developes, has slipped into the office he and Volman share at WXRK while we were talking down the hall. Gray-haired and drowsy-eyed, he's browsing through the day's issue of USA Today.

After some small talk, he autographs my compact disc copy of *The Turtles Twenty Greatest Hits.*

"I'm a big vinyl fan," he says. "Compact discs are just not the same."

"But you know," he continues, beginning to brighten, "CDs really don't matter as long as there's publications like Goldmine and people willing to trade records like they were autographed baseballs. You're always going to be able to find The Blues Magoos; there's no panic here. It's just like if you missed the first episode of Alf or something, somebody has it. You can always put out the word."

Looking as if he'd like to return to his paper, I quickly asked if he'd define the appeal of the Flo and Eddie radio show.

"I don't think people expect to hear this good a time, or two thousand dollars given away in a contest, or two California bozos delivering records to their ears. And if you don't come on like a superstar, and don't assume you know too much, or anything, then that will eventually endear you to them.

"You know much more about the music we play than I do, and I don't want to learn. Once you start putting in controls, then you're a discjockey — I didn't spend the last twenty-eight years of my life trying to be a DJ. Be the next Casey Kasem? No thank you."

by Danny McCue